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FROM TURN TAKING TO SENSE MAKING:
CLASSROOM FACTORS
AND IMPROVED READING ACHIEVEMENT

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Abstract

Classroom studies have produced compelling findings about the complexities of instruction in reading. These findings indicate that the instructional practice of teachers is shaped by contextual factors associated with classroom life. At the heart of these findings is turn taking, the verbal interchange that is assumed to be the essence of instruction. This study examines the research on classroom context from the perspective of the teacher and argues that improved reading achievement rests upon teachers who go beyond turn-taking to more substantive instructional in-

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FROM TURN TAKING TO SENSE MAKING:
CLASSROOM FACTORS AND IMPROVED READING ACHIEVEMENT¹

Gerald G. Duffy²

Context shapes behavior. Hughes Mearns (1958) illustrated this in a poem about correct language usage:

When looking out I see a car
Of friends come calling from afar,
I cry to Mother right away,
"Oh, that is they! Oh, that is they!"

~~When in my room with girls and boys~~
I hear, "Who's making all that noise?"
I step outside and cheerfully
Call down, "It's we! It's only we!"

When Teacher asks, "Who has, pray speak,
"A birthday in the coming week?"
And I have, then I'm mighty spry
To say, "Please, Ma'am, it will be I."

But pounding on a bolted door
With bears behind me, three or four
If I should hear, "Who could that be?"
I'd scream, "It's me! It's me! It's me!"

The message is no less true for reading instruction. Here, too, context shapes behavior. In reading, however, the situation is more complex. The context is multi-faceted, including physical factors (such as classroom dimensions, type of furniture, number of students and instructional materials)

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and social factors (such as the implicit rules guiding dyadic interaction and the effects of various social groupings).

These contextual factors influence teacher behavior and, presumably, student outcomes. For instance, when class size is increased, teachers tend to change their instructional behavior, and different outcomes result. Bossert (1979), McDermott (1977), and Mehan (1979) suggest similar relationships regarding social context.

In this paper, however, I argue that the dominant classroom factor during reading instruction is neither social nor physical. It is the psychological belief that instruction in reading is accomplished by assigning turns to pupils, usually without prior explanation. Because turn taking is the hub of instructional activity in reading, I suggest that greater teacher effectiveness and, ultimately, improved reading achievement depends upon teachers' ability to incorporate explanation into this pattern.

Background

Historically, reading-instructional research has been conducted without concern for teacher behavior. For instance, a major reading-instructional research effort of the 1960s--the First Grade Studies (Bond & Dykstra, 1967)--included no information about what went on in the classrooms. The only data were pupil achievement measures. Apparently, the researchers assumed that each teacher would carry out instruction in the manner prescribed by the method and that, hence, what happened in the classroom between testing sessions mattered little.

However, since the early 1970s, researchers have looked into classrooms in new ways. The first, known as "process-product" research, focused on

carefully defined, instructional behaviors and how these correlated with achievement outcomes. The results of such studies gave rise to "direct instruction," a general concept that places a premium on academic focus, pupil engaged time on task, and careful teacher monitoring of pupil response (Rosenshine, 1976; 1979). Experimental studies based on such correlational findings provided further evidence of its positive impact, particularly in the area of primary-grade reading (Anderson, Evertson, & Brophy, 1979).

By the late 1970s, the process-product findings generally had answered the question regarding what made certain teachers more effective than others. As described by Brophy (1982b) and others (as cited in Duffy, 1981b), the effective teacher (1) allocates most of the classroom time to instruction and enhances student use of this time through efficient classroom management, (2) sets positive expectancies for students and backs these up by engaging students in academic activities that result in very high success rates, and (3) assumes responsibility for actively teaching and avoids simply managing instruction through the distribution, monitoring, and correcting of assignments.

Unqualified support of process-product findings began to wane in the late 1970s, with the advent of descriptive field studies of reading instruction. For instance, Brophy (Note 1), Duffy and McIntyre (1982), and Durkin (1978-79) reported classroom reading practices which, although they seemed to embody the process-product findings, did not include teacher assistance to students. The instruction had an academic focus, the students were engaged, and the teacher monitored carefully, but the quality of the lesson was poor. Similarly, researchers of teacher thinking and decision making (as cited in Duffy, 1981a), who hypothesized that the most effective teachers are those who select instructional strategies from among alternatives based on conceptual models that guide and govern thinking, found evidence of teacher decision making in

the planning stages of instruction (Borko, Shavelson & Stern, 1981; Clark & Yinger, Note 2), but noted that actual instruction was based on routines that provide structure and predictability, rather than on conceptual models. Finally, when Anderson (1981) examined student responses to classroom reading instruction, it was clear that sense making was not an outcome. Such research highlighted the mechanical way reading instruction is often conducted in classrooms and the paucity of teacher explanation. The instructional focus seemed to be on keeping things moving smoothly rather than on providing quality assistance to students.

~~These classroom findings caused researchers to look beyond process-~~
product findings to determine what makes teachers effective. The result was a growing interest in classroom context. Researchers began to think about classroom instruction as dynamic and fluid, occurring within a collective setting and involving both structural subtleties of environment and interactional subtleties of communication. From this came an understanding of why teachers emphasize materials management and place relatively little emphasis on active teaching and explaining. The context constrains instructional practice, limiting teacher options and encouraging the use of routines and mechanical monitoring procedures that simplify the task of working in a complex environment. In short, because classrooms are hectic places, teachers use routinized techniques to insure some degree of predictability and control.

These latter findings have resulted in an expanded view of teacher effectiveness. The process-product findings are now viewed as prerequisite to effective instruction but not as the total picture. For instance, while it is clear that a teacher's classroom management skills are crucial to effective instruction and that failure to get pupils engaged and to keep them engaged results in low achievement, it is equally clear that well-managed classrooms

do not necessarily guarantee quality instruction or substantive instructional assistance to pupils. Consequently, for the 1980s, the pressing question about classrooms and improved reading achievement is, "How can teachers, despite the complexities of classroom context, provide reading instruction that emphasizes sense making and minimizes mechanical monitoring?" This paper is based on the assumption that the key lies in modifying the turn taking model.

Understanding Turn Taking

Turn taking is the prevalent instructional model in American schooling.

Virtually everyone assumes that instruction is occurring when a teacher asks a question or assigns a turn, the child responds, and the teacher reinforces or corrects. The repetition of this format forms the structure of most lessons. In reading, for instance, the turn-taking pattern is evident in oral round-robin reading, in the questioning that follows the reading of basal stories, and in the presentation of workbook pages. By assigning turns, the material in the basal gets covered. Hence, while turn taking is used frequently by sociolinguists such as Mehan (1979) to describe the process by which teachers and students decide who gets a turn during instruction, it refers here to a prior question. Rather than *who* gets a turn, the procedure itself is being questioned. The premise is that turn taking, not *who* gets a turn, creates teachers who interrogate rather than teach (Durkin, 1978-79), who assess rather than assist (Duffy & McIntyre, 1982).

Such turn taking is reflected in typical teacher-talk patterns during instruction. Most teacher talk seldom exceeds two or three lines of audio tape transcript, as shown in Figure 1 (Duffy & Roehler, Note 3). Student responses are the same length as teacher talk or shorter and consist primarily

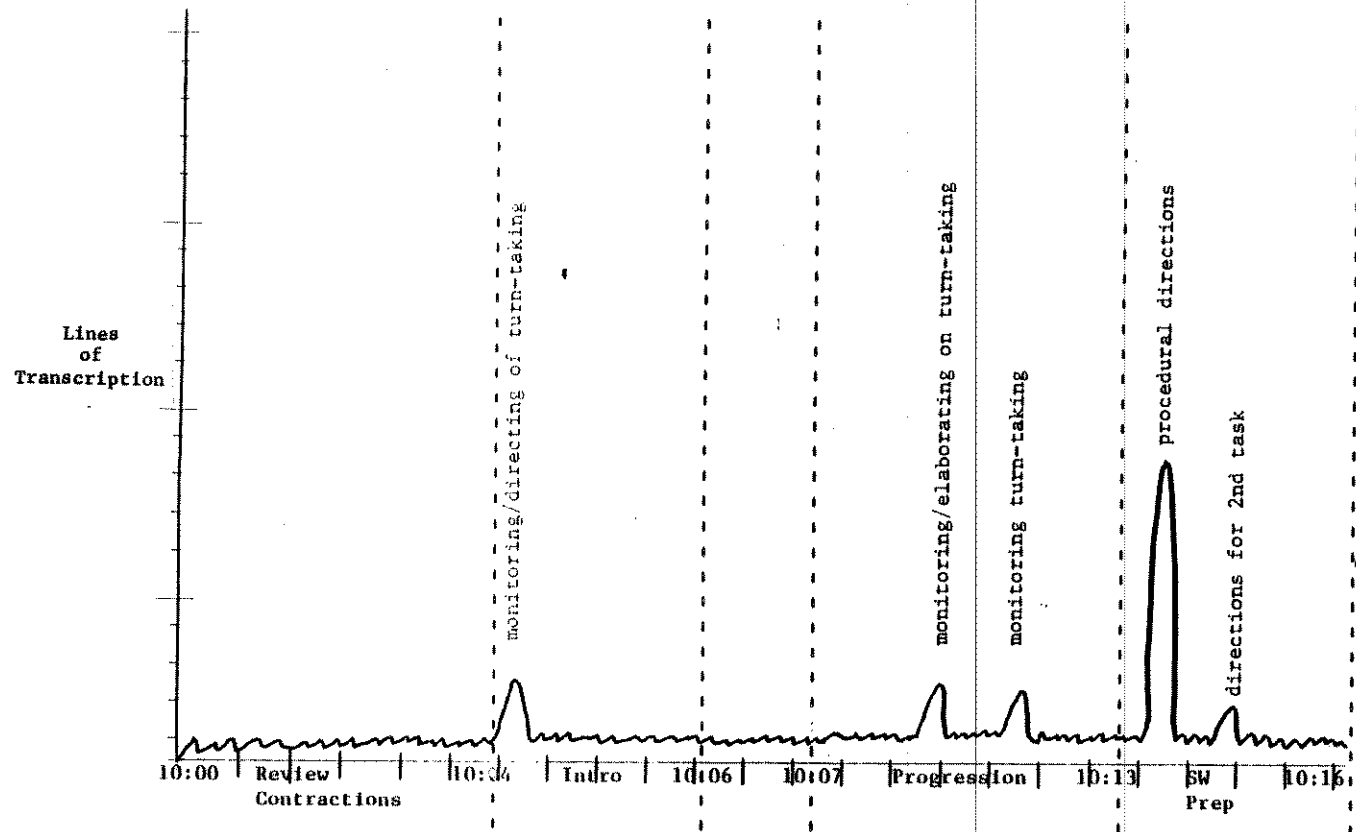


Figure 1. Teacher talk pattern for Teacher A, Task 2 on March 2.

of providing the "right" answer. For instance, the following instructional interaction occurred during a second-grade lesson on finding the main idea:

T:³ You listen to the story I read you and I will give you three possibilities for titles. I want you to listen to the story real closely. See if you can pick out a good title for it. All right, here is my story.

(teacher reads story orally)

All right, now here are some possibilities. A trip downtown. A new shirt. The shirt that didn't fit. Now, those three possibilities, which one would go best? Angela?

S: A trip downtown?

S: A trip downtown.

T: Okay, Tom, what do you think?

S: The new shirt.

T: Andy, what was your choice?

S: The new shirt.

T: Susie, how about you?

S: The new shirt.

T: I think the girls decided on the trip downtown and the boys liked the new shirt. Mainly, what was the story about?

S: A trip downtown.

S: Getting a new shirt.

T: Getting a new shirt, wasn't it?

The dependence upon a turn-taking model is clear. The teacher offers no prior explanation or strategy; she only asks for answers. Similarly, her responses to student answers do not create an understanding of either the main idea or a strategy for figuring out the main idea. Apparently, students are expected to generate both the answer and the strategy through the process of responding in turn to the questions.

³"T" stands for teacher, "S" for student.

Even when the teacher makes an effort to supply explanation or shape pupil responses, the result leaves something to be desired. Consider the following excerpt from another lesson in the same second-grade classroom:

T: We're going to talk about possessives. What's a possessive, Matt?

S: (no response)

T: A possessive shows ownership. How do you show ownership?

S: (no response)

T: When you add an apostrophe *s* to "boy" it shows that the boy has something. The boy's. Can you make up a sentence for kitten?

S: There's a basket full of kittens.

T: You added just *s*. That's more than one kitten. This time make it ownership. Troy?

S: The kitten always owns the basket.

T: All right, but can you change the sentence around? You're saying the kitten owns the basket. Let's use kitten and basket.

S: Kitten basket.

T: But with an apostrophe *s*.

S: The kitten's basket.

T: The kitten's--that's the kitten's basket. All right, what belongs to the kitten, Jennifer?

S: The basket.

T: The basket. All right, let's try it with dolphins.

The teacher's explanations are limited to a single sentence at a time and are punctuated by requests for pupil responses. Her intent seems to be to keep the activity moving and to get the right answer. There is little evidence that she explicates either a sensible understanding of the function of possessives or a strategy for using them effectively.

The problem with turn taking is not the idea of taking turns or the focus on student response. To the contrary, the above examples would not be

improved by having students respond in unison or by eliminating student opportunity to respond. The problem is the reliance on an instructional interaction pattern that emphasizes pupil response *without providing for teacher explanation and other forms of substantive verbal assistance.*

The absence of teacher explanation in instructional interaction has at least three consequences for reading instruction.

First, it poses a problem of equity. It is an implicit assumption of ~~turn taking that all students learn by responding to turns--that all students~~ can spontaneously generate a sense of how reading works by being given exposure to reading tasks (such as reading basal stories and doing workbook pages) and by being directed to those tasks with questions. While some students undoubtedly do learn while taking turns, it is doubtful that all students are equally able to do so. Low aptitude students, particularly, may be too mystified about how reading works to spontaneously generate answers without benefit of prior explanation. By expecting such students to figure out answers for themselves in basically the same way as the high aptitude reader, teachers fail to respond to their needs and create an inequitable instructional situation.

A second consequence of minimizing explanation is that it forces both teachers and students to focus on answers, rather than process. When the teacher assigns a turn, the right answer is required. Consequently, the emphasis is on accuracy, not sense making. Reading instruction, in contrast, ought to be based on the understanding that language is composed of a reasonably logical set of conventions which, if understood, help readers make sense out of reading. These conventions, usually presented as skills, should be explained as problem-solving strategies that provide a sense of predictability in interpreting print. The turn-taking model, with its focus on getting answers rather than explaining how the process works, causes both teachers and

students to view reading as a mechanical activity rather than as a set of sensible conventions.

Third, turn taking masks the teacher's explanatory role in instruction. Webster defines teaching as "imparting knowledge of or skill in." The verb "impart" implies that the teacher actively explains, illuminates, and clarifies. Turn taking, however, places teachers in a passive role, limiting them to interrogation or to assignment of turns and to feedback regarding the correctness of the response. As a consequence, teachers do not know how to explain when poorer readers do not catch on spontaneously. While Allington (1980), McDermott (1977), Collins (Note 4) and others suggest that poor readers have difficulty because teachers provide them with different instruction, it actually seems that poor readers receive basically the same instruction as good readers. The turn-taking model still prevails; teachers still ask questions or assign turns, and explanation is still hard to find. The only real difference is that teachers slow things down for poor readers. They break the instruction into small pieces, they drill more, and they move more slowly. In short, they try to simplify the task while still using turn taking, and, as Brophy (1982a) suggests, probably fragment the learning too much in the process. Other than this, however, there is no substantive difference between the groups for good and poor readers. Neither gets illuminating explanations, explicit strategies, or modeling designed to help students become conscious of the sense-making principles of language.

What To Do

Reading instruction that emphasizes conscious sense making is to be desired over mechanical instruction. The question is, "What should be done to achieve such instruction?"

The key lies with modifying the turn-taking model, particularly for poor readers. Specifically, teachers ought to provide deductive or inductive explanations at the outset of the lesson *and then* conduct turn taking. Including explanation provides students (especially those who do not catch on spontaneously) with specific assistance regarding how the language process works and how skills can be applied as problem-solving strategies to make reading a sensible and controllable activity. In short, they need to know how to respond before being assigned a turn. In addition, explanation also helps teachers use turn taking as a window on student processing, rather than as a place to get answers. They can look for evidence of successful processing, rather than right answers.

By modifying the turn-taking model in this way, teacher effectiveness can be improved. When a teacher does not explain, whether deductively or inductively, limits are placed on achievement. Students who might have understood better with an explanation are left with imperfect understanding, and students who do not understand at all are left confused. Hence, achievement outcomes are limited and the teacher is less effective.

Preliminary findings from a pilot study of teacher explanation behavior indicate that there is indeed such a relationship between explanation and teacher effectiveness (Duffy & Roehler, Note 3). In the study, which took place in a natural classroom situation, three teachers were observed and audiotaped six times each as they taught their low reading group. After each observed lesson, the researcher intervened with the teacher, suggesting how explanations could have been improved. After each lesson, pupils were interviewed regarding what they thought they were learning, why they thought it was important, and how to do it. Achievement was also monitored.

The results suggest a relationship between teacher explanations and pupil awareness and achievement. One teacher had extremely poor ratings for his explanation behavior, and his students showed very little growth in either awareness or achievement. Another teacher sporadically exhibited explicit explanation behavior. When she did, the students' awareness and achievement was high; when she returned to a standard turn-taking model, their awareness and achievement were lower. The other teacher responded extremely well to intervention and consistently provided highly rated explanations. His pupils responded with consistently high achievement and awareness. Modification of the turn-taking model to include explanation seemed to make both the second and third teachers more effective.

Of equal interest, however, are qualitative results that suggest what constitutes effective teacher explanation. Five characteristics have been identified to date.

First, *teacher explanation includes explicit information about what is being taught and why it is important.* Consider the following contrast between two teachers regarding the explicitness of what is being taught:

Teacher A: Today we are going to do syllables.

Teacher B: Today we are again studying about comprehension, a comprehension skill of being able to read clues in a paragraph and make a reasonable guess of what is going to happen next, what the author has in mind. They call that making inferences, based on the information you have.

A similar contrast is evident regarding what the two teachers say about why a skill is taught. Teacher A gave no explanation to students about why they were learning syllables but, when interviewed by the researcher, said, "I would hope that they would be able to do the workbook page successfully." In contrast, Teacher B gave students the following purpose for inferring:

I want to underline some of the clue words that you need to pay attention to and again, when I do it here it is for the purpose that when you get back to your own reading, whether you are reading a textbook or some fun reading or a newspaper, you are able to pick out these clues yourself.

A second characteristic of explanation is that *the teacher clearly tells students how to do the task*. For instance, Teacher B, when teaching pupils to use the *ou* vowel combination to sound out unknown words, gave the following explanation:

Okay, let me tell you how I would do this if I were reading alone. Let's suppose I was reading along and I came to the word "out" and I have never seen the word before, which is really possible. I see an *ou* and I know *ou* has the sound of "ow" like Gracie said. It sounds like a *w* is in there--ow--and I know it has a *t* at the end and the *t* sounds like t-t-t. So, I have ow-t, out.

In contrast, note Teacher A's explanation of how to figure out the main idea of a story:

T: Sometimes he (the author) just can't think of a title, so he writes the story first. And then what? When you have the story written?

S: Then you can get ideas from the story.

T: Then you get ideas from the story that is already written down for titles, possible story titles.

S: How I do it is I write a story down and then I write a title that goes with it.

T: Okay. Well, there are all different ways but I think most of you are understanding that the title comes from the story, doesn't it? The reader has to get an idea of what the story is about. All right, we've got to move on.

Teacher B puts himself in the student's place and models how he uses the *ou* as a problem-solving strategy. He talks out loud about what he does so that the usually invisible cognitive processes are made visible. Teacher A, in contrast, maintains the turn-taking pattern and never surfaces the cognitive processing one employs to determine main idea. The closest she gets is to say "the title comes from the story."

Third, because explanation requires verbal communication, *teachers using explanation talk more*. Figure 2 shows a typical pattern for a deductive and an inductive lesson. Note that the instances of teacher talk, while lengthier than in turn-taking patterns, are not excessive. Also note that the teacher eventually returns to a turn-taking pattern in order to check student understanding and to solidify the learning.

Fourth, effective explanation requires that *teachers must monitor student-cognitive processing as they re-structure teacher explanations, providing appropriate elaboration as needed*. Consider the following exchange that occurred in Teacher B's classroom following an explanation of connector

words:

T: Connector words are what, David?

S: Two words put together.

T: What are connector words, Josh?

S: Two words hooked together.

T: They are not two words. Maybe I explained that incorrectly. A connector word is a word that connects one or more ideas. Okay, in this sentence, "They always walk to school together and they always walk home together." Now in this sentence there are two ideas. They always walk to school and they always come home. Of the four connector words I put on the board, which word is connecting the two ideas, David?

S: And.

T: And. Do you see that? And. I have it underlined here. See how it is connecting the ideas of walking to school together and coming home together? It is sort of like a bridge that connects these two. Bridges connect different places, words connect ideas. Connector words connect ideas.

Teacher B responded to the misunderstandings by providing an example, highlighting the role of the connector in the example, and supplying an analogy for understanding the function of connectors. In contrast, Teacher A provides less assistance. In the following exchange during a lesson about finding the main idea, the responses are not what she really wants:

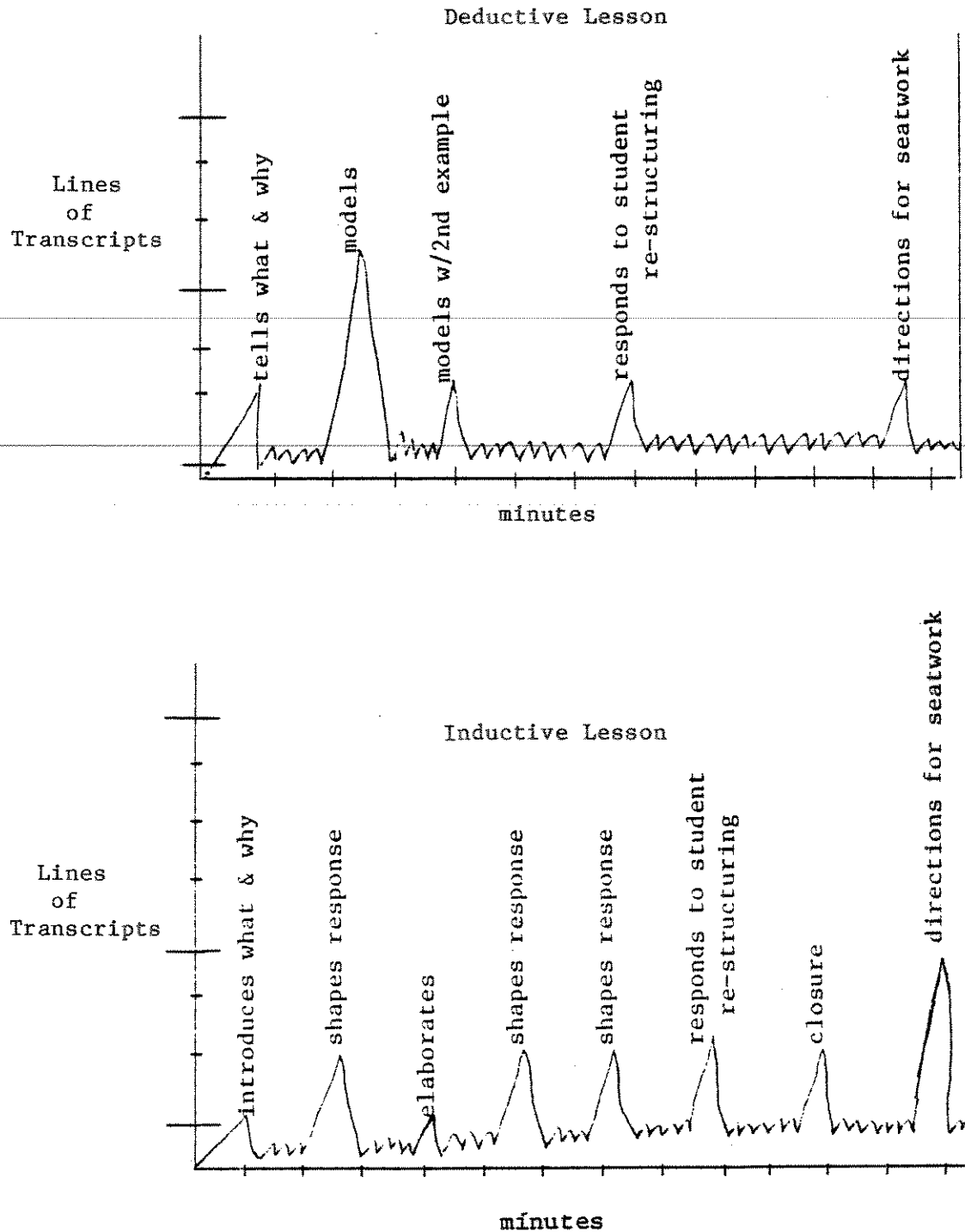


Figure 2. Typical explanations in deductive and inductive lessons.

T: Now imagine that you are the author. Can you think of any other title that you would choose?

S: The shell by the seashore.

T: All right.

S: Sandy at the sea.

S: The shell at the sea.

S: The pink shell.

T: The pink shell? Think a little bit more. Sometimes it takes more than (snaps her fingers) like that to come up with an idea. Sit and think a minute.

In contrast to Teacher B, Teacher A counters misunderstanding not by supplying an example and highlighting how to solve the problem but by asking pupils to slow down and think. She returns to the turn-taking model in which the expectation is that students should spontaneously and independently produce correct responses.

Finally, *good explanation is characterized by cohesion across lessons*. The sequence of Teacher A's lessons showed little cohesion. Typically, she would begin with oral round-robin reading, then she would teach a skill and assign a workbook page, then she would teach another skill and assign another workbook page and, if there was still time, she would have some more oral round-robin reading. There was never an attempt to connect what was happening in one lesson with what was happening in the next. The following excerpt from a lesson transcript is typical:

T: All right, we are finished with the first thing that we were going to do. We were going to talk about the story and discuss it. We've done that. Now I would like you to close your books. We're going to think about something that will help you in writing stories.

In contrast, Teacher B organized his instruction to enhance cohesion. He always taught a skill first, then provided practice in using the skill, then guided pupils in applying the skill in basal text stories, and then directed

them to use the skill when reading independently. He stated explicitly that a skill being taught would immediately be used to make sense out of connected text, with the expectation that students would then apply it themselves when doing "real" reading. Instruction was cohesive, not fragmented.

This study suggests that teacher effectiveness may require more than management of materials and that, given a modification in the turn-taking model, teachers need not be dominated by the complexities created by classroom context. To the contrary, the three pilot classrooms were all taught by teachers who were subject to the same physical and social contexts typically found in many classrooms. However, two of the three teachers improved their instruction by modifying the turn-taking model. Consequently, it is possible that improved achievement can result if teachers are shown how they can embed substantive instructional assistance into the turn-taking model.

Difficulties in Modifying Turn Taking

On the surface, it would seem fairly simple to modify the standard turn-taking model to include teacher explanation. It is not, for four reasons.

First, turn taking is a tradition of American schooling. Our parents remember being taught in a turn-taking mode and our teachers taught us using turn taking. Consequently, educators teach that way themselves. It is almost second nature. Ask any teacher to spontaneously teach anything and, invariably, the first communication to the student will be a question, not an explanation. The effect of this tradition is most dramatically illustrated in the statements of the researchers themselves. For instance, both Bossert (1979) and Doyle (1981) are eminent researchers of teaching who think long and hard about classroom life. Yet, both equate instruction and turn taking, with Bossert defining instructional assistance as the "opportunity to answer questions" and Doyle defining it as "answering occasions." Apparently, both take

the tradition of turn taking for granted, and both focus on pupil answers, not teacher explanations.

Second, this tradition has been inadvertently assisted by educators who say that the best teachers use Socratic questioning and discovery techniques, and that teacher talk is a sign of poor teaching. As a result, teachers emphasize turn taking and minimize explanation not only because it is a culturally acceptable way to conduct schooling, but because they want to look like good teachers.

Third, turn taking is a difficult pattern to modify because it appears to work (with the good readers, at least). Good readers do well when given opportunity to respond to turns, so teachers conclude that turn taking is effective. They reason that poor readers can learn this way also if they just have more drill and practice. Consequently, they give poor readers opportunity to respond without benefit of prior explanation, forgetting that practice is necessary, but not sufficient, for learning to occur.

The main reason turn taking persists, however, is because it eases the problems of management in four ways. First, turn taking as a procedure emphasizes pupil talk. Teachers reason that students who are talking in an orderly way are involved and that too much teacher talk causes pupils to become bored and off task. Hence, turn taking is the teacher's way to insure on-task student behavior. Second, as Bossert (1979) points out, turn taking places teachers in the center of the action where they can control the behavior of children. By focusing on students rather than explanation and by directing the proper child to respond at the proper time, order is maintained. Third, from this central position teachers can prevent breakdowns in the smooth flow of classroom activity by introducing variations in the turn-taking pattern. For instance, Doyle (Note 5) has observed that in order to keep

turn taking going, teachers adjust the "correctness criterion" to insure that a student can respond to his/her turn or sometimes even complete the activity for the student. Similarly, McDermott (1977) has reported teacher behavior in which children are denied turns because they do not respond spontaneously when their turn arrives, while Rist (1973) has reported that teachers often conduct what he calls a "phantom lesson" in order to insure a semblance of turn taking even when nothing is being learned. Finally, the turn-taking model persists because the primary tool of reading instruction--the basal textbook--promotes turn taking and thereby eases management. From the teacher's guide to the workbook pages, basals emphasize turn taking and minimize explanation, as documented by the work of Durkin (1981) with teacher's editions and of Osborn (Note 6) with workbooks. Thus, teachers' concern about management causes them to view any variation in the pattern--such as inserting explanation prior to turn taking--as a risk because it may disrupt smooth activity flow.

In sum, turn taking is a very practical way to run instruction. It puts the teacher in a position of control and virtually insures that only one thing will happen at a time. When combined with the forces of tradition, with the faith that it does work, and with the fact that many teachers may be engaging in turn taking because they have not been trained to provide sense-making explanations (Duffy & Roehler, 1982), the difficulties in achieving even minor modifications seem immense.

Conclusion

Certainly, many classroom factors influence reading achievement. The process-product findings provide a valuable foundation regarding the nature of these factors, and the contextual findings provide insight into the complexity and subtlety of the factors. However, the key factor may well be turn taking. It is the prevalent instructional pattern in American schools. Teachers ask

questions and pupils answer them. In this way, instruction is accomplished and the school day proceeds smoothly. Probably nothing else shapes reading instruction more than the expectation that one is teaching when one asks students to respond to questions in turn. In fact, it is the pursuit of this instructional pattern that explains the prevalence of teacher monitoring behavior found in field studies of classroom reading.

However, the drive to achieve risk-free and smooth turn taking may be an impediment to effective instruction. Students may not be learning--or may not be learning as much--because they cannot figure out how to make sense out of reading simply by being asked to respond to questions. Hence, educators must help teachers modify the turn-taking pattern to include explanation. Providing explanations of how to do reading tasks is a crucial part of the teacher's instruction, and it is essential if all pupils are to view reading as a sense-making--rather than a mechanical--process.

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